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ABSTRACT

The result of a study designed to assess student attitudes toward grading practices are discussed. Questionnaire responses of 3439 students in three institutions were tabulated. Responses were generally negative toward conventional grading systems. (MS)

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Student Attitudes toward

Grades and Grading Practices

by

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Among those aspects of higher education deemed, by would be academic Savonarolas, in need of immediate reform, are grades and grading systems.

The Student in Higher Education, a report by the Committee on the Student in Higher Education appointed by the Hazen Foundation, includes this recommendation.[1]

"Competition in all colleges should be reduced. Grades should be optional, and the student should be permitted to settle for a pass-fail alternative if he so desires. Undergraduate institutions may have to defy the graduate schools to accomplish this reform, but they should ask the graduate school faculty how good a predictor of performance and productivity in later life undergraduate grades really are (p.61)."

In the same vein, the June 1, 1968 issue of the University of Illinois Campus Report contained a statement on educational reform proposals submitted to the Urbana-Champaign Senate Committee on Educational Policy. These proposals were an outcome of joint meetings of "the Educational Reform Student Group and a smaller group of the faculty (mainly those who are members or chairmen of various college and University curriculum committees)." As perceived by Professor Charles Wert, a member of the faculty group, there were five categories of student demands for educational reform. One of these demands was that "the GPA (grade point average) pressure must be reduced." Concerning this demand Wert commented:

"This pressure (GPA), mainly occasioned by entrance requirements of graduate and professional schools, is more fierce than most faculty members realize....A corollary is the obvious, continued annoyance of grades as a goad to the attainment of success in courses. Whether or not we can do anything about the latter, I believe that the assessment of achievement needs immediate attention (p. 1).

It was partly in response to this so-called GPA pressure that a pass-fail grading system was initiated at the University of Illinois (Champaign-Urbana campus) during the Spring semester of the 1967-1968 academic year. Indeed, the Committee to Study the Grading System of the Champaign-Urbana Senate, in their "Report and Recommendations", dated May 1967, observed:

"The purpose of the pass-fail system would be to encourage students to explore areas of interest which they might otherwise feel compelled to pass over because exploration might lead to poor grades....The committee believes that adoption of the pass-fail system recommended in this report would constitute one small but significant step in reducing the sometimes detrimental over-emphasis on grades that now afflicts our students (Item II A, p.1)."

It was the purpose of this study to assess, in a systematic way, student attitudes toward grades and grading practices. Clearly, it was desirable to obtain a representative cross-section of student attitudes toward the existing grading system, rather than to rely exclusively on the spoken and written statements of a few articulate student advocates of educational reform. Furthermore, with data on student attitudes toward the grading system, some of the logical arguments adduced by the critics of existing grading systems (and by proponents of the pass-fail grading system) could be subjected to empirical investigation.

Procedure

To obtain some ~~intra~~ INTER-institutional data on student attitudes toward grades and grading practices, five Likert scaled questionnaire items were taken from a University of Tennessee study reported in Teaching-Learning Issues (dated Fall, 1967)*. Six other items were developed after a review of the literature (including the Memo to the Faculty, No. 22, April, 1967 of the University of Michigan). The resultant questionnaire is reproduced in Appendix A.

*The Learning Resources Center of the University of Tennessee distributes a periodic news letter entitled Teaching-Learning Issues. The fall, 1967 issue was devoted to pass-fail grading. Included in that issue were questionnaire items and response data, by college, gathered from 424 graduating seniors.

In order to get a broadly representative - if not truly random -- sample, the questionnaire on grades and grading practices was distributed to users of the Course Evaluation Questionnaire (CEQ).** The CEQ is used voluntarily (with the possible exception of teaching assistants in some departments) by many University of Illinois faculty members to obtain some measure of their teaching effectiveness. The CEQ form itself, which is printed on a DIGITEK answer sheet, has space for optional or additional items. When (at the end of the fall semester of 1967) requests were received for CEQ forms, a letter was sent each requesting instructor, asking that he attach the grading practice questionnaire to his CEQ's. Returns, representing 2300 students in eight colleges, were received. In addition, the questionnaires were administered to 1,139 undergraduates at the University of Illinois, Chicago Circle campus.

Results

Table 1 reports a comparison of questionnaire results from three different institutions -- the University of Illinois (Champaign-Urbana), the University of Illinois (Chicago Circle), and the University of Tennessee. The reader should remember that the questionnaire contained in Appendix A was developed by using the University of Tennessee instrument as a nucleus and that the other items were added to that nucleus (items 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, and 86). Consequently, University of Tennessee data for these items are non-existent. Moreover, since the Chicago Circle campus of the University of Illinois does not have pass-fail grading, for that institution there are no data for item 86. The University of Tennessee data, as given in the Teaching-Learning Issues (dated fall, 1967), was presented in terms of Agree or Disagree categories. Therefore, although

**The Illinois Course Evaluation Questionnaire (CEQ), developed by Richard E. Spencer of the University of Illinois, is an instrument used to collect student attitudes towards a course, its purpose is to enable faculty members to collect evaluative information about their teaching. For additional information the reader is referred to "The Illinois Course Evaluation Questionnaire: Manual of Interpretation (Rev.)" by Richard E. Spencer. This manual is Research Report #270 of the Measurement and Research Division of the Office of Instructional Resources at the University of Illinois (Champaign-Urbana).

all responses were originally made on a four point likert scale, in Table 1 these responses have been collapsed and dichotomized into Agree or Disagree categories to facilitate intra-institutional comparisons.

Responses, stratified by class standing, to the questionnaire on grades and grading practices at the Champaign-Urbana campus of the University of Illinois are given in Table 2.

Table 3 shows a comparison of questionnaire responses across eight colleges of the University of Illinois (Champaign-Urbana). Not all students coded in their college affiliation.

Finally, Table 4 presents a comparison of responses to the questionnaire on grades and grading practices from two different units of the University of Illinois, the Champaign-Urbana and the Chicago Circle campuses. The reader should recall that the pass-fail grading option is not offered at the Chicago Circle campus, and that, consequently, there is no data for that campus under item 86.

Discussion

Even a casual examination of Tables 1-4 will reveal the surprising homogeneity of responses across institutions, across classes of one institution, and across colleges of one institution. Of course, this homogeneity of response might indicate a lack of sensitivity in the instrument and thus might not solely reflect homogeneous student attitudes. However, a similar inter-institutional homogeneity of student attitudes was noted by Pace in connection with his College and University Environment Scales (CUES).[2]

"...one can only suggest, tentatively, that students at some colleges might view the institution as a whole quite differently depending on their location within the school, but that in most instances and on most of the dimensions of CUES, the institution as a whole is described in pretty much the same way by different groups of reporters (p.58)."

As is shown in Table 1 across three institutions at least 78 percent of the students agree that an emphasis on grades encourages cheating, restricts study to material likely to be on the test, and encourages students to conform on tests and in the classroom to the instructor's views and opinions. Moreover, at least 80 percent agree that most grades are based on tests which are primarily factual in content. From all three institutions slightly more than half of the respondents agree that they (the students) had failed to take certain courses for fear of low grades.

Table 2 shows a remarkable degree of homogeneity of response across class standings -- especially for the undergraduates. The pattern for graduate students was only slightly divergent.

A homogeneity of responses across colleges of the University of Illinois (Champaign-Urbana) is illustrated in Table 3.

Table 4 contains a comparison, in terms of the four point Likert scale, between the Champaign-Urbana and Chicago Circle Campuses of the University of Illinois. As was pointed out in Table 1, which contains the same data in collapsed form, the responses, item by item, are quite similar.

Given this homogeneity of response, what sort of composite picture emerges? Students believe that the emphasis placed on grades has the deleterious effects of encouraging cheating, restricting study, and encouraging conformity to the views and opinions of instructors. Most students believe that grades are based on tests which are primarily factual in content. Students responses are split over the idea that "competing for grades prepares students for the kind of pressure they should expect when they leave the academic cloister." Slightly over half of the respondents believe that "the grading system tends to reward the conforming student and to penalize the imaginative student." Most students do not agree that "grades in the University are analogous to salaries in jobs." However, most students do agree that "grades provide me with motivation to do assigned

course work." Only a minority of students agree that "grades serve as a 'feedback' to me..." Also, a small majority indicate that they had not enrolled in certain courses, that they would have like to have taken, for fear of low grades. Finally, in the one institution where the question was applicable, only 19 percent of the students note that their advisers had recommended that they should take some course work for pass-fail credit. In short, student attitudes toward the university grading system (in so far as one can generalize from this sample) are quite negative. However, students tend to agree that grades provide an extrinsic motivation to do assigned course work. Perhaps future university policy decisions about grades and grading practices should take notice of the generally negative tenor of student attitudes toward the present grading system.

TABLE 1

An ~~Inter~~-Institutional Comparison of Responses to a Questionnaire on Grades and Grading Practices (Data are Percent Responding)

Institutions	Questions																					
	76		77		78		79		80		81		82		83		84		85		86	
	Responses																					
	A	D	A	D	A	D	A	D	A	D	A	D	A	D	A	D	A	D	A	D	A	D
University of Tennessee (N=424)	83	17	94	6	87	13	87	13	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	52	48	-	-
University of Illinois (N=2300)	80	18	91	7	84	14	85	12	44	53	60	37	27	71	65	32	37	60	58	36	19	73
University of Illinois Chicago Circle (N=1139)	78	18	87	9	80	15	78	18	52	43	54	41	31	65	67	28	36	60	53	41	-	-

NOTE: A = Agree of Strongly Agree

D = Disagree or Strongly Disagree

TABLE 2

Responses of Students, by Class Standing, at the University of Illinois (Champaign-Urbana Campus) to a Questionnaire on Grades and Grading Practices (Data are Percent Responding)

	Class Standing																			
	Freshman (N=794)				Sophomore (N=529)				Junior (N=361)				Senior (N=347)				Graduate (N=136)			
	Responses				Responses				Responses				Responses				Responses			
QUESTIONS	SA	A	D	SD	SA	A	D	SD	SA	A	D	SD	SA	A	D	SD	SA	A	D	SD
76	44	38	13	3	45	33	16	5	41	41	12	4	42	39	14	3	26	43	27	4
77	53	39	5	1	53	36	5	3	51	40	5	2	57	38	3	1	51	36	10	3
78	38	47	12	1	39	42	18	2	35	49	11	2	37	50	11	1	34	50	15	1
79	39	47	10	1	45	37	14	2	35	48	12	2	45	41	10	3	36	56	8	0
80	10	40	36	11	7	35	36	19	8	34	41	15	4	35	41	18	4	31	46	19
81	17	43	33	3	17	40	34	5	13	44	36	3	23	35	36	4	15	57	26	1
82	5	28	48	15	3	22	51	21	3	22	51	20	1	16	53	29	6	18	58	18
83	13	55	23	5	14	50	23	10	13	53	21	10	11	49	26	13	16	54	28	7
84	6	32	40	19	5	26	39	27	4	33	37	22	4	28	47	19	7	44	30	19
85	54	1	1	40	59	1	2	34	60	1	0	35	68	1	0	26	44	0	1	52
86	17	1	1	76	22	1	3	71	29	1	2	63	14	1	3	74	3	0	4	86

NOTE: SA = Strongly Agree
A = Agree
S = Disagree
SD = Strongly Disagree

TABLE 3

Responses of Students, by College, at the University of Illinois (Champaign-Urbana Campus) to a Questionnaire on Grades and Grading Practices (Data are Percent Responding)

COLLEGE	QUESTIONS											
	76				77				78			
	Responses				Responses				Responses			
	SA	A	D	SD	SA	A	D	SD	SA	A	D	SD
Agriculture (N=216)	38	42	10	9	50	39	8	2	38	50	10	1
Commerce (N=199)	39	36	19	4	37	50	8	4	25	57	14	2
Education (N=371)	40	39	18	2	53	38	6	1	38	50	9	1
Engineering (N=77)	43	34	14	5	60	35	1	0	27	60	9	0
FAA (N=89)	39	45	15	1	55	43	1	0	33	55	12	0
LAS (N=956)	44	37	13	3	54	38	4	2	37	43	15	1
Vet. Med. (N=29)	38	38	14	3	55	28	10	0	48	28	10	7
P.E. (N=206)	39	39	16	4	51	34	9	3	45	40	11	2

COLLEGE	QUESTIONS											
	79				80				81			
	Responses				Responses				Responses			
	SA	A	D	SD	SA	A	D	SD	SA	A	D	SD
Agriculture (N=216)	39	48	10	2	8	38	42	11	15	46	38	4
Commerce (N=199)	30	53	13	2	10	41	38	9	11	51	31	6
Education (N=371)	42	47	9	1	7	37	36	17	12	46	37	2
Engineering (N=77)	39	45	12	0	6	44	34	12	26	35	35	0
FAA (N=89)	37	56	4	2	8	25	49	18	22	48	29	0
LAS (N=956)	42	42	12	1	6	36	37	18	19	39	35	4
Vet. Med (N=29)	41	28	10	14	21	28	45	0	14	41	24	14
P.E. (N=206)	48	40	8	2	11	30	39	18	20	49	23	4

TABLE 3 (Continued)

COLLEGE	QUESTIONS											
	82				83				84			
	Responses				Responses				Responses			
	SA	A	D	SD	SA	A	D	SD	SA	A	D	SD
Agriculture (N=216)	3	27	50	17	13	52	26	5	6	32	40	19
Commerce (N=199)	5	18	51	24	17	54	21	7	4	32	43	19
Education (N=371)	4	22	54	18	12	58	23	5	5	32	41	21
Engineering (N=77)	3	26	51	17	12	66	14	4	5	26	42	23
FAA (N=89)	4	15	61	20	9	55	30	6	1	34	46	19
LAS (N=956)	4	21	51	20	11	51	24	11	5	30	38	23
Vet. Med. (N=29)	3	24	38	28	17	52	14	10	17	34	38	3
P.E. (N=206)	4	33	44	17	14	52	23	8	2	34	37	23

COLLEGE	QUESTIONS							
	85				86			
	Responses				Responses			
	SA	A	D	SD	SA	A	D	SD
Agriculture (N=216)	50	1	0	45	13	0	2	78
Commerce (N=199)	58	0	3	37	30	0	3	63
Education (N=371)	61	1	0	35	11	0	2	82
Engineering (N=77)	47	0	1	48	26	0	1	66
FAA (N=89)	71	0	2	26	22	2	2	73
LAS (N=956)	58	1	1	36	19	1	1	73
Vet. Med. (N=29)	55	0	0	34	7	0	0	79
P.E. (N=206)	58	1	3	33	22	2	3	67

NOTE: SA = Strongly Agree
A = Agree
D = Disagree
SD = Strongly Disagree

TABLE 4

A Comparison of Responses to a Questionnaire on Grades and Grading Practices at two Campuses of the University of Illinois (Data are Percent Responding)

QUESTIONS	INSTITUTIONS							
	University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana (N=2300)				University of Illinois Chicago Circle (N=1139)			
	Response				Response			
	SA	A	D	SD	SA	A	D	SD
76	42	38	16	4	41	36	14	4
77	53	38	5	2	50	37	8	1
78	37	47	13	1	34	47	14	2
79	40	45	11	1	34	43	16	2
80	7	37	38	15	13	39	31	13
81	17	42	34	4	16	38	36	6
82	4	23	51	20	5	25	46	19
83	13	52	23	8	15	53	20	8
84	5	31	39	22	7	29	39	21
85	58	1	1	36	52	1	1	41
86	19	1	2	73	—	—	—	—

NOTE: SA = Strongly Agree
A = Agree
D = Disagree
SD = Strongly Disagree

REFERENCES

1. The Hazen Foundation, Committee on the Student in Higher Education. The Student in higher education. New Haven, Conn.: The Hazen Foundation, 1968.

2. Pace, R.C., CUES (College and University environment scales): preliminary technical manual. Princeton, New Jersey: Educational Testing Service, 1963.

CEQ, Part III: Optional Items
Items 76 through 86

The following statements concern grades and grading practices at the University of Illinois in general and should not be interpreted in terms of any one course. For each statement, check the extent to which you agree or disagree. Base your answers on your personal experience only. Use pencil only.

76. The emphasis placed on grades is a major factor in encouraging cheating.

77. The emphasis placed on grades restricts study to material likely to be on the test.

78. Despite instructors' insistence that they do not teach "facts", most grades are based on tests which are primarily factual in content.

79. The emphasis placed on grades encourages students to conform on tests and in the classroom to the instructor's views and opinions.

80. The competition for grades presents a realistic model for the competitive nature of life in the world outside the university; that is, competing for grades prepares students for the kind of pressure they should expect when they leave the academic cloister.

81. The grading system tends to reward the conforming student and to penalize the imaginative student.

82. Grades in the university are analogous to salaries in jobs.

83. Grades provide me with motivation to do assigned course work.

84. Grades serve as a "feedback" to me, telling me if I have learned the material.

85. Answer YES (CODE STRONGLY AGREE) or NO (CODE STRONGLY DISAGREE): Have you failed to take courses that you would have liked to take because of the possibility of your grade point average being lowered?

86. Answer YES (CODE STRONGLY AGREE) or NO (CODE STRONGLY DISAGREE): My adviser has recommended that I take some course work for pass-fail credit.